

News

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Big Brother, Little Brother — for life



BROTHERLY BANTER — Big Brother Steve Rotz, right, and Jabari Miller joke around at Yogaberry in El Dorado Hills Town Center, during a happy reunion last month.

EL DORADO HILLS — El Dorado Hills family man Steve Rotz hails from Michigan, but found himself in Baltimore right out of college in the mid-1980s, working hard all week, far from family and friends.

“I was there alone and looking for more out of life,” he recalled. “I remembered those old commercials with a boy sitting on a doorstep looking forlorn until his Big Brother shows up. The kid’s face lights up and the sun comes out.”

What better use of those lonely weekends? It wouldn’t cost much — he was strapped with student loans — and it seemed like a good thing to do.

Rotz’ “kid on the doorstep” was a precociously bright 10-year-old who would grow up to become Major Jabari Miller, a West Point graduate and tank commander with two tours in Iraq, one each in Kosovo and Korea, and another in Afghanistan this summer.

The pair had a reunion of sorts last month when the “little,” in Big Brother Big Sister parlance, was in El Dorado Hills with his wife and kids to keep tabs on his “big.”

Miller is currently attending the Army’s Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kan.

Sitting on a picnic table outside Yogaberry, the frozen yogurt shop Rotz’ wife Darcee operates in the El Dorado Hills Town Center, Miller recalled a case worker visiting his Baltimore County home in 1985.

“He said they had a shortage of black Big Brothers, and would I mind a white guy,” recalled Miller. “I was good with whatever. So was my mom.”

Thus began a 26-year relationship that's as strong now as on that first day the wooden 23-year-old young man stood in Regina Miller's living room.

"My family is very physical, we're all big huggers," said Jabari Miller. "But Steve was never a very huggy guy, so he's standing there all stiff meeting my family."

Despite being hug deficient, Rotz went on to a successful marketing career with Intel and now Micron in Folsom. He said his journey from lonely 20-something to a successful, 49-year-old family man was shaped by the animated boy he met in Baltimore.

"I was a latch-key kid, back when you could do that," said Jabari. "I did a lot of chores; Mom did a lot of working."

His parents divorced shortly after he was born. His father was not a factor in his life.

Regina Miller worked full time at the Social Security Administration and took classes in business administration in the evening, often with her boy out in the hall doing homework. She got help from family, but recognized a lack of male role models in her son's life, outside of his pastor and his grandfather.

Jabari recalls asking questions his mother couldn't answer. "I think she realized that it takes a man to raise a man," he said.

Rotz recalls his "little" as observant, inquisitive and concerned way beyond his years.

"I'm not good at small talk," said Rotz, who was worried about keeping the conversational ball rolling. "That was no problem with this guy. We talked about racial issues, girls, politics; there was nothing off limits."

Jabari confirmed, "I dropped some heavy ones on this guy, and he never backed off."

He recalls the car rides in Rotz' Mazda 626 as much as the Civil War battlefield tours and ball games. "Car time was class time to me," Jabari said. "I learned life lessons from him in there."

Regina Miller quickly realized the importance of the awkward white boy. "She saw how good it was for me," said Jabari. "I remember messing up and getting grounded, but when Saturday came around she made sure I got my Steve-time."

Regina Miller had moved to racially integrated Baltimore County, where the schools were better by the time Rotz entered their lives. But on weekends, Rotz often picked Jabari up at her parents' house in a Baltimore neighborhood where white faces were rarely seen in the mid-1980s.

"Baltimore was no racial utopia at the time," said Jabari. "You could see the heads turn ... 'What's that white boy doing down here?'"

Rotz left Baltimore for graduate school four years after he arrived. But Jabari wouldn't let his Big Brother slip quietly into the night. A steady stream of letters followed Rotz to Michigan.

Jabari even figured out a way see his “big” in person, catching a ride to visit relatives in the Midwest, talking them into the long drive to see Rotz, then riding the Greyhound back to Baltimore County.

“There was really no interruption in this relationship,” said Rotz, even after he graduated and took jobs on the West Coast.

Jabari describes the relationship as “a pure mentor/mentee thing right from the beginning. Just because he moved didn’t mean I couldn’t call him and say ‘Dude – what about this?’”

In seventh grade Jabari, who’d always been a good student, landed a scholarship to a private school in suburban Baltimore. He thrived, staying on through high school. He went on to West Point, graduating as an Armor Officer with Steve and Darcee Rotz in the audience for the hat toss.

Jabari said he finds himself teaching his children lessons he learned from Rotz. “He taught me that life is about choices,” said Jabari. “If you want something, you make the choices and you do the work. Buck up.”

Jabari also cited the value of the perspective he gained from his mentor, “just getting out of that world and seeing that people live in different ways,” he said. “And that continues to this day. My wife and I are looking around at El Dorado Hills this week and seeing a pretty nice place here that I wouldn’t know about without Steve and Darcee.”

Maybe some day, after Afghanistan, he’ll bring the family out for good.

The lessons continue. “Steve’s not some estate baby,” said Jabari. “He earned what he’s got. I knew him when he was poor and I know him now. I want for my family a lot of things he’s achieved for his. He made the choices and did the work.”

Regina Miller, reached by phone at her home in Baltimore, added, “I love Steve, and I’m eternally grateful for what he did for this family.”

Rotz counters that the inquisitive 10-year-old filled a gap in his life at a time when he was vulnerable and alone. “I’ve gotten every bit as much as I’ve given in this relationship,” said Rotz, who recently became a board member for Big Brothers Big Sisters of El Dorado County.

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